DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 262 512 EC 180 920

AUTHOR	Runions, Ted; Smyth, Elizabeth
TITLE	Mentorships for the Gifted and Talented. 1985 Digest.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Handicapped and Gifted Children, Reston, Va.
SPONS AGENCY	National Inst. of Education (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	85
CONTRACT	400-84-0010
NOTE	3p.
AVAILABLE FROM	ERIC Clearinghouse on Handicapped and Gifted Children, 1920 Association Dr., Reston, VA 22091 (one free copy).
PUB TYPE	Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055) -- Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis Products (071)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Elementary Secondary Education; *Gifted; *Mentors; Program Development; *Talent
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

The digest considers the operation and function of mentorships in gifted and talented education. Defined as learning partnerships between two or more individuals regarding a mutual interest, mentorships are designed to differentiate the curriculum through such means as creating opportunities for learner access to professional expertise in the community, offering real-life experiences, establising a network of community resource people, and providing leadership opportunities through tutoring between and among elementary and secondary school students. Organization is reviewed for formal (such as enrichment components of regular courses) as well as informal processes. Suggestions are offered for initiating the program, including orientation of all parties to their redefined roles and development of self-directed learning skills. A brief list of resources on the topic concludes the digest. (CL)

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MENTORSHIPS FOR THE GIFTED AND TALENTED

What Are Mentorships?

Mentorships are learning partnerships between two or more individuals who wish to share and/or develop a mutual interest. The mentor serves as advisor, guide networker, and role model to a learner who seeks to explore the mentor's experiences.

Why Are Mentorships Significant in the Education of the Gifted and Talented?

Mentorships provide a creative and viable means of differentiating programs for gifted and talented learners:

- By creating opportunities for learner access to professional expertise in the community to pursue in-depth career and academic interests at competent levels.
- By offering real-life experiences that support the growth of the learner's self-concept through the acquisition and application of life skills.
- By facilitating the cooperative use of community resources in more effective and efficient ways.
- By establishing a network of community resource people available to all members of the school community.
- By offering the learner more responsibility in the learning process.
- By providing an experientially-based framework for enriching the curriculum.
- By involving the learner in the application of networking skills necessary for an information society.
- By providing leadership opportunities through cross-age tutoring between and among elementary and secondary school students.
- By presenting traditional and nontraditional role models of competence in the pursuit of and commitment to excellence.
- By supporting the development of independent and interdependent learning skills in real life situations.

How Can Mentorships Be Organized as Part of the School Experience?

Mentorships can be as simple as the matching of a specific interest of a student in the classroom with a community resource or as complex and multidimensional as linking a number of students with a community network around many interests or varied applications of one interest. They can be developed around the type of mentor used: career, academic, creative, junior citizen, senior citizen or the type of skills learned and exchanged: leadership training, career exploration, community resources management, life-skills development, future problem solving.

Mentorships can be organized:

Informally: on an individual basis linking a student in a regular classroom or specialized program with a community resource person.

Formally:

As an enrichment component of a regular course.
As a structured option in an enrichment program.
As the framework for implementing a classroom-based differentiated curriculum.
As part of a school-wide community/career education program.
As a community/agency based education program.
As a computer-assisted global information network integrated into any learning experience.

How Are Mentorships Developed?

In selecting the strategy for your school and community to use in developing a mentorship program, the following suggestions may be helpful:

- Select students who have the intensity of interest and commitment to explore learning beyond the classroom.
- Select school and community resource people interested in pursuing mentorships.
- Develop program and curriculum guidelines flexible enough to accommodate mentorships.
- Orient all participants (student, teacher, mentor) to their redefined roles—students as co-learners, teacher as facilitator, mentor as networker.
- Develop communication skills—telephone skills, interview skills, small group process skills, letter writing skills, contract learning skills, and journal writing skills.
- Develop community research skills—data collection, analysis, and presentation.
- Develop self-directed learning skills—decision making, problem solving, critical thinking, creative thinking, effective communication, and self-evaluation.
- Establish a community-based component of linking agencies (volunteer bureaus) that can facilitate access to available and receptive people and print resources.
- Make evaluation a shared process among the learner, the mentor, and the teacher, with clear and precise guidelines mutually agreed upon. Both the program and process should be evaluated on an individual and group basis, using the techniques of quantitative and qualitative evaluation, as well as summative and formative eva-

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luation. Because mentorships are a personal learning experience, self-evaluations can play an important role in communicating the value of the experience.

Further Considerations

- Mentorships are negotiated learning experiences which require commitment and compatibility from all participants.
- Mentors enrich program and personnel. Their interests and expertise supplement rather than replace the teacher and the curriculum.
- Mentorships take time to develop as learning partnerships.
- Mentorships are an example of experientially-based learning in which as much can be learned from mistakes as from unqualified successes.
- Mentorships are not displaced classrooms but unique learning situations, characterized by unpredictability, energy, and surprise!

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Prepared by Ted Runions, Lord Elgin High School, Burlington, Ontario, and
Elizabeth Smyth, Francis Liberman High School, Scarborough, Ontario, Canada

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This publication was prepared with funding from the National Institute of Education, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. NIE-400-84-0010. The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of NIE or the Department of Education.